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Students Protested Last Week When They Were Asked to Remove Patriotic Symbols

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**BODY:**

Officials at the University of Maryland backed away yesterday from a decision to discourage students from flying political banners and U.S. flags from dormitory windows, saying the school administration "supports strongly such displays as expressions of free speech."

William L. Taylor Jr., vice president for student affairs at the College Park campus, said the university "has absolutely no prohibition" against the hanging of flags and banners on public buildings, nor any plans to institute one.

"We are not asking people to take flags down. People can fly flags anywhere they want if they want to," Taylor said. "On the banners issue, we are trying to get people to be thoughtful about what they say so as not to offend anyone, but we have no restriction on those either."

Taylor's statements followed a campus uproar that began last week when officials with the university's Office of Resident Life asked students to remove flags and banners that had been hung on the outside walls of some dorms since the start of the Persian Gulf War.

In an interview Monday, Jan Davidson, an assistant to the director of resident life, said the request was made out of concern for student safety and because administrators were afraid that a proliferation of signs would put them in the awkward position of having to mediate disputes about which war-related displays were appropriate and which were offensive.

Roz Hiebert, a university spokeswoman, said yesterday that the action by the resident life officials "was a misinterpretation of what they thought our policy is."

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Although students were not ordered to remove the materials because the school does not have a written sign policy, many interpreted the requests that way and felt their free speech rights were being violated, said Vicki Gruber, president of Maryland's Student Government Association.

Gruber said the students were allegedly told that if they did not comply, it could lead to a ban on all outdoor decorations, such as posters boosting the Maryland Terrapins and holiday light displays.

"It was like a threat," Gruber said.

Yesterday, some members of the Maryland Senate said they were equally dismayed by the events at the university. Near the end of the Senate's morning session, Sen. Howard A. Denis (R-Montgomery) told his colleagues that he was "greatly offended" by reports that students were being discouraged from flying the American flag and called the action "entirely inappropriate in an academic setting."

"The university has permitted the most controversial speakers in the world to come on campus for a profit," Denis said.

He demanded that the university relent, saying "failure to do so would significantly diminish the university's credibility, with at least this senator."

According to Gruber, students remained confused yesterday about the university's position on the flag issue, despite Taylor's remarks, because they had not been told they could rehang their materials.

"All he said was there wasn't a rule banning flags and banners, which we already knew. The thing is, they tried to make us take them down anyway," Gruber said. She added that in absence of a definitive ruling, student leaders planned to put a sign in their office window yesterday saying, "Just Do It. Hang Your Flag."

Staff writer Richard Tapscott contributed to this report.